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ABSTRACT

After suggesting that excessive teacher absenteeism is a growing problem, this paper summarizes research studies investigating teacher absences and makes recommendations based on the findings. The studies correlated teacher absences with a number of variables, including contractual (salary, benefits, and leaves), procedural (absence policy), environmental (working conditions or demographic data), and social (ways employees interact with fellow employees) variables. Recommendations include hiring teachers that research shows are less apt to be absent (those with good attendance records, who live close to work, and who agree with district educational philosophy); devising a credit or payment plan for unused absences; instituting departments or team teaching; maintaining an open school climate; including the teacher's attendance in yearly evaluations; giving attendance awards to teachers; requiring proof of illness; and requiring teachers to report absences to a supervisor. It is warned that each recommendation may have some drawbacks or may not be suitable for all districts. (JM)

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In Search Of Ways To Reduce Unnecessary Teacher Absenteeism

by Evan Pitkoff

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In Search Of Ways To Reduce Unnecessary Teacher Absenteeism

The Problem

Employee absenteeism is a chronic problem in the public and private sectors of the United States. In 1976, 3.5% of the total scheduled work-hours were lost.[1] Employee absenteeism reduces productivity and can be very costly. This is particularly true in the case of teacher absenteeism.

In 1976, approximately 3.75% of the total scheduled work-days for teachers were lost, costing taxpayers more than one-half million dollars for substitute teachers and $120 million in fringe benefits for the regular teachers.[2] In addition, some have suggested that substitute teachers tend to be less effective in classroom instruction than the regular teachers.[3]

The number of sick days used by teachers is increasing despite a decline in the overall number of teachers and students.[4] Although teacher absenteeism is attributable in part to illness, it is also attributable "in part to abuse of sick leave priveledges by healthy employees."[5] Some educators have called for strong action to be taken to alleviate sick-leave abuse by teachers.[6]

Elliott and Manlove (1977) have stated that "there is no evidence of any serious attempts to reverse the growing absence problem."[7] The purpose of this paper is to investigate the research done concerning teacher absenteeism and to propose ways in which to help alleviate the problem.

Research

In order to distinguish sick-leave abuse from legitimate sick-leave use, most studies on teacher absenteeism have concentrated on one and two-day absences, especially Monday and Friday absences. Although this is certainly not a pure measure of sick-leave abuse, it is a more useful measure than including long term absences which are invariably due to illness or accidents.

The variables studied in relation to teacher absenteeism seem to fall into four categories: 1) contractual, 2)procedural, 3) environmental, and 4) social variables.

1) Contractual

Contractual variables include those items which pertain to teacher remuneration, including salary, benefits, and sick-leave provisions.

Although "salary is rarely directly related to the quality of performance in the classroom"[8] as satisfaction with pay increases, absenteeism decreases.[9]

Elliott and Manlove (1977) point out that "the time allowed by contracts for teacher absences is increasing."[10] Winkler (1980) suggests that "absenteeism increases with the number of sick-leave days and with sick leave pay."[11]

Some school districts have an income protection plan, which provides insurance against the loss of pay once accumulated sick-leave has been exhausted. Winkler found that income protection plans result in higher short-term absenteeism.[12]

2) Procedural

Procedural variables refer to the school's policy toward dealing with absences. Research has shown that when teachers are required to report each impending absence directly to their principal, they are less likely to be absent[13] and when teachers are required to bring in proof of illness, they are less likely to be absent.[14] Winkler suggests that these procedures impose "nonpecuniary costs on the teacher for being absent."[15]

3) Environmental

Environmental variables are those conditionsunder which the employee works as well as demographic data.

Bridges and Hallinan (1978) found that subunit size, i.e. "the scale of operations for any grouping of the members of an organization that systematically excludes part of the membership of that organization,"[16] has a direct effect on teacher absenteeism.[17] Smaller work units have lower absenteeism.

Distance from work (travel time) is positively related to teacher absenteeism.[18]

Spuck (1974) found that "schools with low levels of teacher absenteeism report high levels of community support and have teachers who tend to agree with district goals and policies.[19] This was found to exist even when there were low levels of material inducement and unpleasant physical conditions.[20]

Age is also positively related to absenteeism. However, this may be due to health problems rather than sick-leave abuse.[21]

Females are found to be absent more frequently but for shorter periods than males; males are absent more days.[22]

4) Social

Social variables refer to the ways in which employees interact with fellow employees and how they derive satisfaction from their jobs.

Bridges and Hallinan have conceptualized absenteeism as a substitute type of withdrawal.[23] It would seem that if an employee was satisfied with his job, he would not resort to withdrawing (in the form of absence.) However, Bridges concludes that "job satisfaction is not a major factor in absenteeism."[24] What is related to job satisfaction and does have a direct positive effect on teacher absenteeism is work system interdependence, ie., "the extent to which the organization's primary function is arranged and carried out jointly or collaboratively by employees."[25]

Esposito (1981) compared teacher absence rates in schools characterized by an open climate (where teachers work well together and the principal serves as a facilitator) and schools characterized by a closed climate (where teachers tend to have difficulty working together and the principal is aloof and not concerned with teacher welfare.) Esposito found "significantly lower absence rates in schools that teachers perceived as more open than in schools that they perceived as more closed."[26]

Because extrinsic rewards in school systems tend to be applied in a general way, intrinsic rewards are important motivators in school systems. System rewards, peer group approval, internalization of organizational goals, and self-expression are all related to decreased absenteeism.[27]

Proposals For The Reduction Of Unnecessary Teacher Absenteeism

The following proposals, which are based on the research findings discussed in this paper as well as anecdotal accounts in the literature, may be useful to help alleviate unnecessary teacher absenteeism.

1. Hiring Practices

   a) Carefully check the applicant's prior attendance to see if there is a history of spotty attendance.

   b) Consider the distance that the applicant will have to travel to get to work each day. If the applicant lives far away from the school, ask him if he will be commuting or relocating.

   c) Devise a written test to see how well the applicant's philosophy of education agrees with current school district policies.

2. Credit/Payment Plan For Unused Sick-Leave

   The New York Telephone Company allows it's patrons to use "operator assistance" on three occassions each month without charge. In addition, the customer receives a credit on his monthly bill for the value of three "operator assistance" calls. Therefore, the patron can make six "operator assistance" calls each month without increasing his bill or he can reduce his monthly bill by not making more than three "operator assistance" calls.

   This scheme can be applied to sick-leave provisions. Reduce the number of sick -leave days each year from ten to

five and also offer the equivalent of five extra days pay each year. If the teacher chooses to use more than five "sick" days, he will forfeit the extra pay (one day's worth for each extra day absent.)

In Gary, Indiana, "teachers determined who was paid for an absence. Funds for payment of substitutes were given to their committee in September; what was left was distributed to all the teachers in June. The system had it's flaws, but there weren't many absences."[28]

3. Departmentalize (by subject, grade, etc.)

This will reduce subunit size and foster greater work system interdependence.

4. Team Teaching

This will also foster greater work system interdependence.

5. Maintain An Open School Climate

Make teachers feel that they are an integral part of the school.

6. Include The Teacher's Attendance In His Yearly Evaluation

This worked very effectively in the Merrick School District in New York.[29]

7. Give Attendance Awards To Teachers

This can even include cash bonuses for those teachers with the best attendance.

8. Require Proof Of Illness

Require that the teachers bring in a medical doctor's note to explain each absence. Teachers will be less likely to "take a day off" if they have to spend part of that day in a doctor's office.

9. Require Teachers To Report Each Impending Absence To A Supervisor

Teachers will probably feel uneasy about lying directly to their supervisor as opposed to lying to a school secretary, aid, or answering machine.

Cautions

The preceding proposals are not panaceas. Each school must decide which policies are most effective for their own situation. Consideration must be given to the drawbacks associated with the various proposals. For example, proposals 2, 6, 7, and 9 might encourage some teachers to come to work even when they are ill. This is undesireable especially since they may transmit their illnesses to students and teachers, causing an increase in student and teacher absenteeism.

Furthermore, by excluding applicants who live far away from the school, one might be excluding an outstanding teacher; by excluding an applicant whose educational philosophy is incongruent with current school policy, one might be eliminating the potential exchange of new and variant ideas; by teaming up teachers, one might inadvertently be exacerbating personality clashes; by requiring proof of illness, one might be encouraging teachers to make unnecessary trips to the doctor's office which will lead to

greater expenditures for the school board who pays for teachers health benefits; by departmentalizing and/or requiring teachers to report absences directly to a supervisor, one might be taking additional time out of the supervisor's already overburdened daily schedule; etc.

Finally, any policy changes which are implemented can become negotiable at the bargaining table. "The teacher's organization may be willing to accept a new rule only if the district makes concessions elsewhere."[30] Policies should not be implemented until an assessment is made regarding their direct and indirect costs. These costs must be weighed against the financial and educational costs of excessive teacher absenteeism.

Footnotes

1. E.M. Bridges, "Job Satisfaction and Teacher Absenteeism," Educational Administration Quarterly, 16 (2), 1980, p 41.

2. Bridges, p41.

3. P.G. Elliott and D.C. Manlove, "The Cost of Skyrocketing Teacher Absenteeism," Phi Delta K ppan, 59, 1977, p269; and D.R. Winkler, "The Effects of Sick- Leave Policy On Teacher Absenteeism," Industrial and Labor Relations Review, 33 (2), 1980; p232, and Elliott and Manlove, p269.

4. Elliott and Manlove, p269.

5. Winkler, p232.

6. Elliott and Manlove, p270; Times Educational Supplement, "And On The Third Day....," 3254, October 21, 1977, p2; and P.H. Gendler, "How One School System Cut It's Teacher Absenteeism In Half," The American School Board Journal, 164 (10,) 1977, p32.

7. Elliott and Manlove, p270.

8. D.W. Spuck, "Reward Structures in the Public High School," Educational Administration Quarterly, 10 (1,) 1974, p 20.

9. Bridges, p53; E.M. Bridges and M.T. hallinan, "Subunit Size, Work System Interdependence, and Employee Absenteeism," Educational Administration Quarterly, 14 (2,) 1978, p35.

10. Elliott and Manlove, p269.

11. Winkler, p 233.

12. Winkler. p240.
"Districts also vary in terms of their treatment of teachers once their sick-leave is fully used. In some districts, teachers are docked their full pay; in others, they receive the difference between their salary and that paid the substitute." Winkler, p 234. Under this type of treatment, a teacher could receive several thousand dollars by not working at all.

13. Bridgea, p53; and Winkler, p240.

14. This is particularly true for Monday and Friday absences. Winkler, p 240.

15. Winkler, p234.

16. Bridges and Hallinan, p25.

17. Bridges and Hallinan, p18; Bridges, p53; and Winkler, pps 237 and 240. Winkler suggests that there is a threshold effect with respect to staff size. In his study the influence of staff size on short-term absences was not linear. p 239.

18. Bridges and Hallinan, p35; and Winkler, p239.

19. Spuck, p 29.

20. Spuck, p 29. It is interesting to note that student-teacher ratio was not significantly related to teacher absenteeism. Winkler, p239.

21. Bridges, p53; and Winkler, p235.

22. Winkler, p235. Again, short-term absence is not a pure measure of sick-leave abuse and therefore one cannot conclude that females abuse sick-leave priviledges more than men do.

23. Bridges and Hallinan, p 24.

24. Bridges, p53.

25. Bridges and Hallinan, p 25; and Bridges, p54.

26. J.P. Esposito, "School Climate Affects Teacher Absenteeism," Phi Delta Kappan, 62, 1981, 458.

27. Spuck, p 21.

28. Elliott and Manlove, p27.

29. Gendler, p32.

30. Winkler, p240.

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